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Where There's a Web, There's a Way:

Statewide Approaches to Promoting Community College Student Transfer

Red states, blue states. Maybe in politics there are differences, but when it comes to progressive transfer policies, the color-line division disappears. From the Northeast to the mid-Atlantic states to the Florida peninsula, across the Great Plains to the Southwest and on to California, state public higher education systems have made, and continue to make, great strides in recognizing the value of community college education. More importantly, they are taking leading roles in demonstrating how to promote access to higher education. One of the most compelling examples of this is seen in the development of transfer and articulation systems that facilitate the transition of community college students into public four-year institutions. Thanks to the Internet, the most exciting and effective way to see this system in action is through the array of Web-based resources dedicated to the transfer process.

Relevance of Resources

Why should Web-based information for community college transfer students be considered important? First, community college students constitute almost half of all enrolled undergraduate college students (Purcell, F. B., 2006; Wyner, J., 2006). There is also evidence that these numbers are on the rise, especially with an emphasis on transfer to four-year colleges (Hossler, D. Ed., 2004, citing McHewitt & Taylor, 2001, Wyner, J.). This point is bolstered by transfer students who indicate spending some portion of their education enrolled at a community college on the way to completing a bachelor's degree (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005).

The potential for growing numbers of community college transfer students carries a serious consequence. Early access to career and transfer-related information becomes critical, since those who begin with a clear goal of obtaining a bachelor's degree are more likely to reach that goal (Wirt, J., Choy, S., Provasnik, S., Rooney, P., Sen, A., and Tobin, R, 2003). One way to ensure that community college transfer students

will attain bachelor's degrees is to increase the likelihood that all their credits will be accepted (Doyle, W. R., 2006).

The existence of state higher education Web resources demonstrates an understanding of these trends. To be sure, states are taking hard looks at their local student populations and, as issues such as graduation rates and state funding appropriations are figured into the cost of providing education, the need to take a second look at community college transfer students cannot be denied. Add to this the renewed concern about the increasing cost of paying for college and it doesn't take much to see the wisdom of working in support of coordinated public higher education systems.

To truly address community college transfer student issues, those involved need an in-depth understanding of the complexities. A number of studies have been conducted to demonstrate this ongoing investigation (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2005; American Association of Community Colleges & American Association of State Colleges and Universities 2004, Wellman, 2002).

These studies all point out important elements in the transfer process, which state higher education systems are responding to by making Web-based resources available. From the perspective of the community college transfer student, these are useful when seen in the form of common transfer questions:

1. "What are the rules and how do they work?"—availability and clarity of **transfer policy information**
2. "What are the advantages of graduating from a community college?"—presentation of **transfer articulation pathways**
3. "Which courses are transferable to a four-year college?"—development of comprehensive **course equivalency database systems**
4. "Can a community college student transfer to a private college?"—**inclusion of private baccalaureate institutions** in state-wide transfer agreements and Web-based information
5. "Who can a community college student speak with to figure it all out?"—**identification of campus-based contacts**, commonly recommended to transfer students and reinforced throughout the transition from a community college to a four-year institution, the important "personalizing" of the transfer process.

Armed with these important questions, what follows is a survey of state-supported Web resources that answer these questions in a variety of ways.

"What are the rules and how do they work?"

Any good college administrator can reel off policies and procedures in his or her sleep, which is perhaps ironic, since this is the sort of topic that runs the risk of putting even the most eager student to sleep in a matter of minutes. But there is no doubt that awareness and negotiation of transfer rules is critical for community college students to successfully enroll at a four-year institution. A number of state-sponsored Web sites present the details of transfer agreements, from higher education commission reports to PDF copies of agreements to well-crafted and readable summaries of the "rules and how they work."

Florida provides information on statewide articulation agreements at the "Transfer Services" link on its FACTS Web site. Maine's Advantage U, which guarantees admission to any University of Maine campus, has an entire Web site dedicated to explaining the program, process, requirements, and exceptions. In Maryland, a dedicated link to the Student Transfer Advisory Council provides information on the strategic plan for implementing the state's course equivalency system, known as ARTSYS. Massachusetts directs its available policy information to areas covering guarantees of course transfer credit (Commonwealth Transfer Compact), as well as its Statewide Education Transfer Compacts, recently established to create academic pathways for teacher training in the state. North Carolina makes its Comprehensive Articulation Agreement documents available, as well as transfer performance reports for students from community colleges who continue at a state university campus.

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"What are the advantages of graduating from a community college?"

The follow-up to this question could easily be: "How many times have guidance counselors and community college admission representatives had to come up with a convincing answer?" In answering this, states have responded with interesting variations based on the same theme—how to guarantee admission from a community college into a state college or university, ensure transfer of academic credits, and in turn validate a student's academic profile and experience. Features and conditions of guaranteed admission programs vary, but all include reference to academic performance (GPA) and specific area of academic study at the community college. Some also require graduation from the community college in order to be eligible.

Maine has developed articulation programs on two different fronts, Advantage U, which guarantees students from a specific community college major (Liberal Studies) into any public four-year institution, as well as articulation agreements

between specific community colleges and majors into specific University of Maine campuses and majors. Massachusetts introduces its “Joint Admissions” program, which guarantees admission to most state colleges and University of Massachusetts campuses, on a major-specific basis. While the guarantee is limited to certain academic majors at the community college level, it carries added tuition-reduction benefits for eligible students.

North Carolina has created “Comprehensive Articulation Agreements” that include three important elements: a common core curriculum applicable at state universities, a guarantee of acceptance with graduation from a community college and acceptance of coursework completed at the community college comparable to the entire associate’s degree. Pennsylvania’s “Academic Passport” program, with its reference to credentialed travel, elevates the guarantee of admission to a higher plane by ensuring that all completed coursework will be honored at the receiving college, meaning no courses need to be repeated. An inventive addition is the validity of passport status for all students enrolled in public community colleges and state institutions seeking transfer, whether or not they have completed associates’ degrees.

“Which courses are transferable to a four-year college?”

Arguably one of the most important, if not frustrating, questions that community college transfer students ask relates to the value of their completed coursework. All students want to know that they are on the right path towards degree completion, especially if they are footing the bill, as is the case for most community college students. The Course Applicability System (CAS), originally developed by Miami University of Ohio, is a unique multi-state vehicle for coordinating transfer credit information. Since its inception, 11 states have joined up with CAS and another two are in the process of development. The Web site allows users to select the appropriate state from a roster list to get course equivalency information.

This sort of broad coordination is not limited to the Midwest. In New England, a similar notion has been proposed to consider the merits of a “regional online transfer system [that] could alleviate the confusion and stress that students and their advisors routinely face when trying to determine how course credits would be applied at a transfer institution (Purcell, F. B., 2006).”

State higher education Web sites have taken the CAS concept and customized it to meet the needs of local community college transfer students. Arizona is one of the states allied with CAS, evidenced by their equivalency database, AZCAS. This is a comprehensive site that organizes information in the question-and-answer “How To” format. Besides offering college-specific course equivalencies, it also provides links to Arizona’s transfer pathways and statewide transfer adviser listing. In California, multiple Web resources are available to

guide community college students through the transfer process. The ASSIST Web site provides comprehensive information about course articulation agreements between community colleges and the California State University and University of California systems. ASSIST also provides financial aid and scholarship information. The Web site can be searched in a number of ways, including by major or academic department at the receiving school, and can also provide transfer admissions requirements for specific majors or receiving institutions. The California Articulation Number System (CAN) Web site pro-

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vides information on common course numbering at community colleges and their applicability in the California State University system, as well as private, independent institutions.

Illinois, another CAS member, provides course equivalency information within a General Education Common Core format. It also allows students to view popular majors and identify the common core applicable to that program. In Maryland, the ARTSYS course equivalency system is comparable to the CAS model, linking all Maryland community colleges with the University of Maryland system. North Carolina provides a comprehensive PDF list of all community college courses, including detailed applicability (elective vs. specific requirement) in preparation for transfer within the

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University of North Carolina system. Similarly, the Pennsylvania course articulation system, PATS, provides course equivalency information between community colleges and state colleges.

The Texas Common Coursework Numbering System Web site includes both public and private higher educations in the state, and combines contact information for each college. In addition to the kinds of course equivalency capabilities listed above, Wisconsin makes use of “Credit Transfer Wizards,” which allow students to search by course and college (course wizard), by a specific course that a student wants to transfer back to their program (reverse wizard), and by courses that meet general education or graduation requirements (general education wizard).

“Can a community college student transfer to a private college?”

This may be a question that varies in frequency across the United States, but it is certainly one of the first ones asked by community college students in New England. This is to be expected, given the large number of private institutions in the region, but just as likely because of the well-established cache of New England’s private colleges. In this context, it makes sense that transfer information at the Maine community college system Web site includes articulation agreements with a number of private institutions.

Still, this awareness of public-private transfer is supported in other regions of the United States. As noted above, California and Texas have both included private institutions in their comprehensive course numbering systems. Similarly, Illinois, New Jersey and North Carolina all provide lists and/or links to private colleges and universities that participate in their respective articulation agreements.

“Who can a community college student speak with to figure it all out?”

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attempts to provide current, comprehensive, 24/7 transfer information for students via the Internet, states also recognize the importance of real-time, first-person interaction to help demystify the transfer process. Higher education Web sites across the country, from Arizona to New Jersey, and Maine to Texas, provide campus contact information in PDF files and Web-link tables.

Putting It All Together

The public higher education Web sites in this survey have been chosen to highlight important features of transfer information. A number of states have customized their Web-based resources, in fact making transfer one important component of a larger, holistic approach to higher education services. These are Web sites that represent the kind of comprehensive, customer-focused, and user-friendly source for transfer-related issues and information that students have come to expect from online sources.

Five state sites are notable in this regard: Florida, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Wisconsin. Florida touts its Web site as “Florida’s official online student advising system.” This boast is backed by a comprehensive array of resources, both at the secondary and postsecondary levels. High school selection, college admission, academic and degree requirement advising, workforce and career links, financial aid and scholarships information are all included at this site. The Minnesota Web site provides a similar array of resources for high school and college students, and their advisors. It includes links to student services in the areas of childcare, disabilities supports and credit for prior learning. Minnesota also includes neighboring states, North Dakota and Wisconsin, for elements such as course equivalencies and campus contacts. Besides including private colleges and universities in its Web-based information, New Jersey also gears its information to high school and college students, and provides links

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to career sites and financial resources. The College Foundation of North Carolina Web site organizes its resources around secondary education (grade tracking and scholarship searches), as well as the college transition process (standardized test preparation and online applications). An intriguing additional feature is called the “transcript manager,” which allows students to electronically submit high school transcripts along with online college applications. Wisconsin provides course equivalencies, program articulations, policy links, and contact information for “transfer advocates” at the community-technical colleges and campuses of the University of Wisconsin system.

Thoughts For the Future

Web-based technology has greatly impacted the availability and use of information in the transition from high school to college. This is already seen within the college admission process. As younger generations habituate to the Internet for information and guidance, this trend can be expected to continue. Community college transfer students, an emerging demographic trend, can also be expected to use the Web for information and guidance in the transition from two-year to four-year institutions. Fortunately, state higher education systems across the country recognize this trend by making useful information available via the Internet. Whether situated in a red state or a blue state, the Web sites presented here are all exemplary of the current “best” of transfer practices; there is something to be learned from each of them. Now if only politics were this easy.

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